



BOOKS

Inside a former S.F. church, a battle for the future of knowledge

Barbara Lane | February 21, 2022 Updated: February 22, 2022, 3:25 pm



Brewster Kahle, founder of the Internet Archive, outside the Internet Archive offices in a former Christian Science church building in San Francisco's Richmond District.

Photo: Constanza Hevia H. / Special to The Chronicle

You may have passed the white Classic Revival building at 300 Funston St. with its massive columns, maybe even wondered what goes on inside.

Built in 1923 as a Christian Science church, it was bought in 2009 by the Internet Archive. The mission of the IA sounds both magnificent and impossible: “To provide universal access to all knowledge,” according to founder Brewster Kahle. That translates to creating a digital library of internet sites and other cultural artifacts, including books, music and TV shows in digital form. The archive provides free access to researchers, historians, scholars, people with print disabilities and the general public.



The old church building in [San Francisco](#)’s Richmond District was chosen largely because the front of the church resembles the Internet Archive’s logo, which features the Library of Alexandria’s Greek columns.

On a recent weekday, Kahle (pronounced “kale”) was delighted to show me around. He seemed to miss the good old pre-COVID days and the building’s normal hubbub: dozens of employees and volunteers digitizing everything from home movies to old LPs to 8-bit video games.



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Brewster Kahle, founder of the Internet Archive, talks about the servers at the Internet Archive building at a former Christian Science church in the Richmond District of San Francisco.

Photo: Constanza Hevia H. / Special to The Chronicle

With his unruly eyebrows and wildly enthusiastic demeanor, Kahle is clearly the Willy Wonka of the place. Shoeless, he practically leaps around as he shows me the microfiche (remember that?) files and the scanners, actually breaking into a dance when he comes to the antique hand-cranked Victrola, which plays 78 rpm records. Charlie Ventura's "I'm Forever Blowing Bubbles" blares from its large horn, filling the cavernous room with its irresistible melody. I can't resist dancing around the room with him.

But Kahle is in trouble. If a lawsuit filed by publishers Penguin Random House, Hachette Book Group, HarperCollins and Wiley succeeds, he will have to not only shut the archive

down, but also fork over about \$60 million.

The lawsuit aims to stop the longstanding and widespread library practice of Controlled Digital Lending, which would stop the hundreds of libraries using that system, including the Internet Archive, from providing their patrons with digital books.

Through Controlled Digital Lending, libraries lend a digitized version of the physical books they have acquired, as long as the physical copy doesn't circulate and the digital files are protected from redistribution. Only one digital copy is lent at a time. The publishers say copyright law does not allow this practice.

The lawsuit was a gut punch to Kahle. "We've worked cooperatively with them for years," Kahle said, adding that the archive takes down books when requested to do so. "We love books," he asserted more than once during our meeting.

I, too, have worked with publishers for years, as a television and public events producer, for bookstores, and as a book reviewer and columnist. The people I've met in publishing are true book lovers and care passionately about their work. I'm grateful to them for bringing books into the world and supporting authors.

But does the digital lending process really hurt authors? A digital book, even Kahle acknowledges, is actually kind of sad looking, a poor substitute for a real book, even several notches below a Kindle reader version. I've used the service in the past, as Kahle says is common, to check a quote or reread a portion of something I need for research. Is an author, especially a best-seller, a la John Grisham or Malcolm Gladwell, really hurt by that?





Brewster Kahle, founder of the Internet Archive, sits among the staff statues at the Internet Archive building at a former Christian Science church in the Richmond District of San Francisco.
Photo: Constanza Hevia H. / Special to The Chronicle

In the church's old chapel, which remains intact with its wooden pews and gorgeous stained-glass windows, are lifelike clay statues of all the people who have worked at IA for more than three years, made by Petaluma sculptor Nuala Creed. They were inspired by the terra cotta warriors of Xi'an, China, depicting the armies of the first emperor of China.

The Internet Archive is definitely engaged in a battle. It will be interesting to see how it turns out.



Barbara Lane

Barbara Lane can't remember a time when she didn't have her nose in a book. Her column appears every Tuesday in Datebook. Email: barbara.lane@sfchronicle.com

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This move by the publishing companies, which I read about at least a year or two ago, is all about monetizing all access, including digital to what they consider their property. It has a lot to do with who owns the publishing company's now. Or at least controls them.

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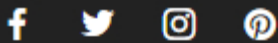
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